

# *The Cañete Fragment: Another Narrative of Hernando de Soto*

by Eugene Lyon

On Tuesday, August 14, 1565, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, one Rodrigo Ramirez, notary public, copied the Royal contract of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés. Menéndez, just named adelantado of Florida and on his journey to its conquest, had come to San Juan on his voyage from Spain and had some need for another copy of his contract. The *legajo*, or document bundle, of Seville's Archive of the Indies in which this document appears, and the particular piece in which it is found, seems to have been a depository for miscellany about Pedro Menéndez and the Florida conquest, ranging in date from 1565 to 1580.

Ramirez wrote across the bottom of the last sheet of the contract copy the following words: "There is in most parts of Florida much worked copper as in thin sheets (*hoja de Milán*); there are in the inland mountains great veins of silver, of very rich metal. Those who entered from Mexico by Copala toward Florida discovered great things, and found a place of more than twenty thousand citizens, and strong and high houses of seven floors and very strong walls. They found dies where they worked silver and many jewels of it and of gold; they had notice of kings crowned with golden crowns, far inland. . . ."

He added that this information had been gathered for the Spaniards in Menéndez's entourage, but "without hope of it."<sup>1</sup> There then follows the one-page Cañete fragment of a larger narrative about the journeys of Hernando de Soto, and several pages about the discoveries of Miguel de Legazpi in the Philippines. It can only be assumed that Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and his followers sought, as they prepared for their landing in Florida, to utilize past knowledge of the continent; it can further be assumed that

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<sup>1</sup>From Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Patronato Real 19, No. 1, No. 15.

Ramirez, or Menéndez, had access to the full Cañete narrative at the time when he was copying the materials at San Juan.

## Relation of Fray Sebastián de Cañete

Some of the things contained in the relation that Fray Sebastián de Cañete and the Captain gave are of the things they saw in Florida, going with De Soto. In the province of Mococho they found a Spaniard who was 14 years among [the] Indians, and he had forgotten his [own] language. He had gone in search of Narváez. The lord of the province of Tascaluco was as large as a Spaniard mounted on a horse. The Adelantado De Soto died in the River of the Holy Spirit in the province of Guachoya.

The clothing that the Indians ordinarily wear are blankets of mulberry roots and of marten, very fine, and this in most parts; and hides of bears, wolves, lions, tigers, and of cows [probably buffalo—E.L.] near the plains. In all parts they found an abundance of food of the land, [such] as corn, beans and squash—infinite fruits of the land of those of Spain: there were four kinds of nuts—hazelnuts and chestnuts; in all the land a great quantity of grapes, and in some parts muscatel grapes, as sweet and flavorful as those of Spain. There are many acorns, and of this they make butter, and of nuts. [There is a] great quantity of woods and greater of plums, very good, and from them they make loaves like quince-sweet [*carne de membrillo*], and in most parts of all Florida they found much gold, which the Indian men and women have, and they offered it to the Spaniards.

There are not a number of pearls, because [he found? word partly destroyed at page margin] in the house of an idol they called El Cu in Cofitachiqui, they found more than 12 horse-loads of pearls, and the caciques of that town who were embalmed in El Cu, they had great sacks of pearls at the necks. They found much worked copper like fine sheets [*hoja de millón* [*sic*] *hoja de Milán*]. The people are very bright and well featured and of acute judgment in the places that they are accustomed [word off page edge].

They not only gave what was necessary to wear and eat for the men but to the horses they gave feather blankets, and in the houses there is a variety, according to the regions; in some parts toward the mountains there are houses with stoves [*estufas*; sweat-houses?], and in other parts they are of flat roofs as in Andalusia. There are elevated [*alzados*? the word is on a page edge and partly torn] places, and very great, and in Tanlo rado [? partly torn]

one hundred; [in?] the province of Coza they traveled along the banks of a river four leagues through populated areas. [The] arms they ordinarily carry are [bows and] arrows, wooden clubs [*macanas*, here spelled *machanas*], and they are so skilled and spirited that in a skirmish that De Soto had in Macula [Mabila], where they killed 25 soldiers of his, was an Indian who went looking for the most valiant and best-armed Spaniard in order to kill himself with him. In Chicaza they came by night upon the Spaniards and took from them whatever they had, with the pearls.

In Cofitachiqui and in other places there were raisins from grapes and mulberries, of which there is a great quantity in all Florida. There are some plains in a certain part that extend more than 300 leagues, all filled with small cows [*vacas pequeñas*: probably buffalo] of very good meat, and there is trade in the hides inland. In all parts there are many turkeys [*gallinas de papada*: literally chickens with dewlap], deer, hares, rabbits, an infinite number of partridge, turtledoves [passenger pigeons?], and many other kinds of very good birds. There are many squirrels, bears, lions, tigers [panther?]; in all the rivers many fish and shellfish, mainly flounder [catfish?]. There are wild olive trees with fruit, liquidambar trees, *chinilla* [china? a species of sarsaparilla]; sumac to tan the hides [*cortir* [*sic*] *curtir*], even though they do not tan the deer hides with it, of which there are a great number in all the land. They greatly abominate those who lie and steal and married women who are bad. When they marry, they go to the house of the maiden's parents—he who wishes to marry with her—and says that they shall gather together her relatives; that he wishes to talk to them. Being gathered together and the marriage being carried out, they all give her to him. If, afterward, she is an adulteress, they return her, the same relatives of the husband, and having gathered her relatives together, the husband says to them, "You gave me this woman as good, and she is bad, and all of you as well; therefore [word off page] beware, patience; you all have to pay," and beginning with the adulteress, they kill them all. There is in everything much justice and reason, as is in Spain. . . .

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Examination of the text of the Cañete fragment and comparison of its contents with the texts of the four major "De Soto narratives" (Hernando Luis de Biedma, Rodrigo Rangel, the "Gentleman of Elvas," and Garcilaso de la Vega, "The Inca") raises many points of interest. In general the other narratives subordinate description to the running tale of exploration, rapine, battle, and disaster. By contrast, the Cañete fragment, even though quite short, devotes much of its space to description of the land, fruits, fauna, and

even the mores of its native peoples. The thirtieth chapter of the Rangel diary, not extant in the Oviedo y Valdés version, appears to have contained some of this type of material, but the Cañete fragment is rich in it. As examples, one may cite the deity El Cu of the temple at Cofitachiqui, and the description of marriage customs and the treatment of adultery in the Cañete relation.

The research question of most import here is: Can the full narrative of Sebastián de Cañete be found? Judging by the promise of the fragment, the search for it seems most worth doing.

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